CORCORAN ART GALLERY
(RENWICK GALLERY)
U.S. (Court of Claims)
N.E. Cor. 17th St., & Penna., Avenue
Washington, D. C.

HABS No. DC-49

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
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The Renwick Gallery
of the Smithsonian Institution

A Brief History, Compiled by James M. Goode, Smithsonian Institution, for the Historic American Buildings Survey, Department of the Interior, 1 March 1971.

Part I: History

The Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, located at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 17th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., was erected 1859-1861 by William Wilson Corcoran (1798-1888), Washington banker and philanthropist, as an art gallery for his private collection of paintings and sculpture. The building was designed by James Renwick, Jr., the prominent New York architect who designed the original Smithsonian Institution Building in Washington in 1847 and the Oak Hill Cemetery Chapel in Georgetown, D.C. in 1859. The history of the Renwick Gallery falls into the following periods of time: erection, 1859-1861; occupation by the U.S. Army, 1861-1869; restoration, 1869-1873; home of the Corcoran Art Gallery, 1874-1897; home of the U.S. Court of Claims, 1899-1964; and the acquisition and restoration of the building by the Smithsonian Institution in 1965-1972.

It was natural for W.W. Corcoran to choose Renwick as the architect, for they had been friends for some fifteen years. Due mainly to Corcoran's influence, Renwick was chosen to design the original Smithsonian Institution Building in 1847 (the Smithsonian had deposited its funds since it's beginning in 1846 with the Corcoran and Riggs Bank of Washington, D.C.). Renwick was assisted by his partner, Robert T. Auchmutz in the design of the building. Both Renwick and Corcoran visited the Paris Exposition of 1854 and must have viewed the new addition to the Louvre which had just been erected in the Second Empire style. The Renwick Gallery has many features which were inspired by the Louvre additions.

The building is very important in American architectural history since it is one of the finest Second Empire buildings in the United States, the oldest art gallery building in the District of Columbia, and one of the first buildings in the United States erected exclusively as a gallery of art. By mid-1861 the exterior of the building was finished except for many of the decorative devices used on the front facade but little interior work had been completed. Since the

gallery was on a site diagonally across from the White House, it was seized by the U.S. Army in August, 1861 for use as a warehouse for the storage of records and uniforms for the Quarter Master General's Corps. The building at that time was roofed but unfloored and unplastered. In January, 1864 the building was cleared and converted into the offices of the Headquarters of the Quarter Master General's Corps (Gen. Montgomery Meigs). After the Civil War, a few rooms on the first floor were still used by this same organization. Although Corcoran's agent continually sent written requests to the U.S. Army for payment of rent for the use of the building, no action was taken by the government during the time it used the structure (1861-1869). The annual rent requested was $8,500.

The loyalty of William W. Corcoran to the U.S. Government was questioned by many officials in Washington since he had departed from the country and remained in Europe during the war years. Before leaving, he rented his house at Connecticut Avenue and Lafayette Park to the French minister. The government was thus prevented from seizing his residence. This building is shown in several interesting photographs taken by the staff of Mathew Brady (that is, the Renwick Gallery) during the Civil War, presently filed in the Prints and Photographs Div., Library of Congress.

The Art Gallery had been erected at a cost of $250,000. Not until September, 1869 was the building returned to Corcoran, who immediately proceeded to make extensive repairs and turn it over to a board of trustees to administer.

A sketch of the history of the Renwick Gallery or old Corcoran Gallery would not be complete without mention of the activities of its founder, William Wilson Corcoran. He rose during his lifetime from a respectable middle class merchant family background to become the wealthest man in the District of Columbia and one of the first great American philanthropolist of the 19th century. Corcoran had an amazingly successful insight into sound investments. He was also extremely honest with all whom he delt with in business. His father was an Anglican-Irish immigrant to the United States and a merchant who became several times mayor of Georgetown, D.C. At the age of 19, young Corcoran opened a dry goods store in Georgetown, in 1818, at First and High Streets. He soon expanded this business into a warehouse and auction house but lost it all in the depression of 1823. By 1828 he had entered the banking business in Washington.

His marriage in 1835 to Louise Morris, age 18, the daughter of Commodore Morris of Washington, was a happy but brief period of his life. She died 5 years later, leaving one daughter, Louise Corcoran. The daughter married in 1859 George Eustis, a Member of Congress from Louisiana. Corcoran's strong attachment to his daughter was one of the major factors which led him to live in

France during the Civil War, where his son-in-law acted as a Confederate diplomat in Paris.

Corcoran took the most important step in his business career in 1840 when he formed a banking partnership with George W. Riggs. The Corcoran and Riggs Bank expanded rapidly during the 1840's, especially since it carried most of the loans of the U.S. Government to support the Mexican War (1846-1848). His business reputation was greatly enhanced during this decade when he made the unprecedented decision to repay all of his creditors from the depression of 1823 (which he was not legally required to do since he had declared bankruptcy at that time) with full interest, which came to double the original amount. He had accured such great wealth by 1854 that he retired from the banking business. The Corcoran and Riggs Bank was then continued as the Riggs and Co. Bank, known today as the Riggs National Bank.

During the remainder of his life, Corcoran traveled, collected art, and gave his wealth to needy causes. Immediately after retirement, he left to tour Europe with his close friend, ex-President Fillmore. He spent much of his time then and during the Civil War, purchasing art works in France. During the war years, his business interests were handled by his business agent, Anthony Hyde of Georgetown.

A list of his major philanthropic endeavors is impressive. In 1847 he purchased part of Georgetown Heights and commissioned the noted engineer, Capt. De La Roche, to landscape Oak Hill Cemetery - costing $70,000. The cemetery was placed under the control of a trust, which still maintains the property. The grounds are noted by architectural historians for their fine early landscaping plans, the Italianate gate house designed by De La Roche, and the chapel designed by James Renwick in 1859. Corcoran was later buried in the handsome Greek Corcoran-Eustis Tomb. He also gave $5,000 to the poor in Ireland during the great famine there in the 1840's. During Kossuth's visit to the United States to enlist aid for Hungarian independence, he paid for the transportation of 200 Hungarian political exiles from New York City to homested in the far West. He erected the Louise Home after the Civil War for $200,000 with an endowment of $360,000, to house and care for some sixty impoverished genteel ladies, mostly from Southern families. This establishment, operated by a trust, is still functioning in Washington. He established and gave over $40,000 to the Washington Orphan Asylum and $1,000 each to seven others in the Southern states after the Civil War. He gave liberally to many Southern colleges to keep them open after the Civil War when the Reconstruction governments greatly reduced or entirely cut off funds to the state owned universities. Without his aid in the critical period of the late 1860's, the College of William and Mary, the Virginia Military Institute, the University of Virginia, and Washington and Lee University would have had to close their doors.

In the District of Columbia, Corcoran presented the Columbian College (George Washington University) with a new medical school building on H St., N. W. His greatest act of generosity was the establishment and endowment of the Corcoran Art Gallery. After the Civil War, Corcoran returned to Washington and pressed for the return of the art gallery. He immediately established a board of trustees and placed the building in a trust when it was returned to his control on May 10, 1869. In May, 1870, it was chartered by act of Congress, by which act the gallery was free from government taxation and by which the gallery was able to recover the back rent due it. Corcoran rushed to restore the building for the purpose of an art gallery from 1869 to 1873.

One of the most important episodes in the long history of the building was the preview of the building at a grand ball on the evening of Monday, February 20, 1871 (not Wednesday, February 22, which is often given as the date of the ball). Over 2,000 ticket paying guests attended from 9 P.M. until 4 P.M. The ball was held for three reasons: to celebrate the birthday of George Washington, to raise funds for the completion of the Washington Monument by the Washington Monument Society, and to open the building "dedicated to art." The ball was held during the carnival season before Lent which was widely observed in Washington in the 19th century. It is interesting to note that this was the first major social event in the city since the termination of the Civil War to which both the pro-Southern elements (mainly the old families to Washington and Georgetown) and the officials of Grant's Reconstruction government attended. President Grant, the Vice-President, the Cabinet, Members of Congress, major officers of the Army and Navy, and the Diplomatic Corps were present.

As guests entered the grand vestibule they deposited their coats to the left (ladies cloakroom) and to the right (gentlemen's cloak room). Behind the ladies cloak room was a long gallery with four handsome Corinthian columns with white shafts and gold capitals and great chandeliers made in Philadelphia. The guests then proceeded up the grand staircase opposite the front door, covered in a crimson carpet, with numerous potted plants in full bloom and trailing vines placed on both sides of the steps. Attendants conducted the guests around to the left and right of the staircase on the second floor to the octagon room, above the main door. They then went through the receiving line formed by W. W. Corcoran, Gen. Sherman, Admiral Porter, Gen. G. D. Ramsay, Sen. Roscoe Conkling, and Secretary Robeson. The main decoration of this room at that time was a large portrait of Corcoran by Elliot painted in 1867. Then the guests were conducted to the great hall or ball room, designed as the main picture gallery, which extended over the entire north side of the second floor. Three doors opened into this great hall - the principal one facing the staircase. Over this main door was a small portrait of Washington, surmounted by the motto "Pater Patria."

The portrait was in addition decorated with wreaths of evergreens.

The east and west sides of the second floor consisted of two pairs of rooms, small galleries, used that night for promenading and dancing by the "Curled darlings, the soft witchery of delightful nothingdom" as a contemporary journalist reported the following day in his best Victorian prose for the Washington Daily Patriot. Richly ornamented sofas, chairs, and ottomans were used in these rooms.

The ball room or main picture gallery was the most brilliant room of the ball. The walls were painted a pale maroon (the other rooms were then unfinished at this time, with walls an off white). On the right side or east end of this room were President and Mrs. Grant and their party who received the guests on a carpeted dais or platform with crimson and gold chairs and sofas. Behind the dais was a full length portrait of George Washington and above was placed a triumphal canopy of flags surmounted by a large American eagle. To the right and left of the platform stood floral pyramids. On the north wall were full length portraits of Clay and Jackson, relieved in the center and flanks by large floor length mirrors. Around and above the portraits and mirrors were draped national and regimental flags, evergreens and floral wreaths. On the left or west wall (opposite the Presidental party) was a similar arrangement featuring portraits of Grant and Lincoln. The mirrors and chandeliers in the room were loaned for this occassion by Architect Mullett of the Treasury Department. Over the entrance on the south wall was erected a balcony for the muscians, supported by white pillars enterwined with leaves and flowers. The room was lighted by unshaded gas jets near the center of each wall and by three huge chandeliers with ground glass globes. The strains of the band were accompanied by the songs of live canaries suspended in dozens of cages from the ceiling.

At 11:00 P.M. the President's party left the ballroom and descended to the room immediately below on the first floor which was used as a dining room. On three sides were tables arranged with every type of food. Corcoran was reported to have spent more on the food and refreshments than was received from the sale of tickets for the Washington Monument Society. Smaller rooms leading from the dining room were arranged for drinks - lemonade, punch, coffee, and chocolate. One reporter noted that champagne and claret flowed like water.

The New York reporter present felt that it was the most magnificent reception ever given in the United States. The one minor event which marred the evening he felt was the dimming of the gas lights. As President Grant entered the ball room the lights were dimmed. After he was seated on the dias the lights suddenly blazed to their full capacity. He wrote the following morning: "Unfortunately when private theatricals are undertaken, rehearsals are necessary to insure a success and as no previous drill had been attempted, neither the actors in the little piece nor the gas itself were in accord." Two French artists, specialists in ball room decorations, were brought from New York to oversee the arrangements for the Corcoran ball.

It is interesting to note that on October 2, 1970, the Smithsonian Institu-

tion opened the Renwick Gallery for the first time for a preview of the building, then in the midst of restoration. The proceeds from the event were to go for restoration costs. The arrangements were in some ways similar to the reception of 1871 - with dancing in the main gallery and refreshments on the first floor. The numerous singing canaries were omitted this time, however. Details of this event were reported in the Washington Post and Evening Star for October 3, 1970.

Work continued on the interior of the building from February, 1871 to January, 1874. The building was first opened as an art gallery for private viewing on January 19, 1874. At this time three rooms had been finished and arranged with art for viewing: the Hall of Bronzes on the first floor and the Main Picture Gallery and Octagon Room on the second floor. A contemporary review of this opening mentioned that the building was of "pressed brick and freestone, in Renaissance style of architecture." The front and side niches for statues were still empty at this time. On April 29, 1874, the Hall of Sculpture was opened. The last of the galleries to be finished, the two small rooms of sculpture adjacent to the staircase on the first floor, were opened in December, 1874. The Hall of Bronzes was located in the room to the left on the first floor, which contained the four great Gorinthian columns. Many of the bronzes displayed were of animals modeled by the French sculptor, Barye. At the rear of the first floor was the great Hall of Sculpture. In 1874 workmen were installing copies of the frieze from the Parthenon on the upper walls. The famous 18 foot cast of the Ghiberti Door of Florence would be in place shortly, covering most of the end wall. Plaster casts of ancient busts were placed here also, including Apollo, Homer, Diana; the Venus de Milo was also in the group.

In the vestibule in 1874 were a colossal bust of Napoleon by Canova, copied from the original in Milan; on the right was a bust of Humboldt by Rauch. Most of the first floor was devoted to sculpture.

The major room in the building was the Main Picture Gallery or the Hall of Paintings as it was sometimes called, at the north end of the second floor. The walls were painted a light maroon (as they had been in 1871), with heavy walnut wainscoting. The paintings exhibited were mostly from Corcoran's own collection, worth $100,000 when he gave them to the gallery in 1873. Also in 1873 one of the trustees, Henry Walters of Baltimore, went to Europe to purchase additional items of art for the gallery. The pictures of prominence in 1874 were Gerome's "Death of Julius Caesar," "The Drought in Egypt" by Portaels, and "Adoration of the Shepherds" by Rafael Mengs, all in the Main Picture Gallery. The Octagon Room, also on the second floor, contained five pieces of sculpture - four in niches: a bust of Shakespeare, "Il Penseroso," "The Veiled Nun," and "Bacchante." In the center stood Powers' original "The Greek Slave," purchased in London by Corcoran for $5,000. It was undoubtedly the most famous piece of art in the Museum in 1874. Additional pictures were to be purchased from the annual income of $50,000 from the endowment.

It is interesting to note here that W.W. Corcoran was a close friend of the first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Joseph Henry (Secretary, 1846-1878). The first mention of the Corcoran Gallery in the records of the

Smithsonian Institution which I could locate was a resolution passed by the Board of Regents directing the Secretary to aid Corcoran in any way in his project to acquire additional art works in Europe. The Smithsonian had many foreign contacts at this time due to the exchange of scientific publications. In 1850, Corcoran and Henry had gone to President Fillmore to urge the government to make improvements on the Mall, which resulted in the contract with Andrew Jackson Downing to landscape the Mall in 1851-1852. In 1877 Henry was serving as one of the trustees of the Corcoran Gallery when the Smithsonian loaned several busts of prominent American statesmen for exhibit at the Corcoran.

Corcoran continued to devote his major time after 1874 to collecting art. In November, 1878 he presented a large painting of the Battle of New Orleans by Sami, a French artist, to the state of Louisiana. After purchasing it from the painter for $20,000, he forwarded it to New Orleans to Sen. Eustis, the brother of his son-in-law, to present to the Governor of Louisiana. It was hung in the state Capitol of Louisiana. He also gave in the late 1870's a large canvas of the Surrender of the British at Yorktown, also by Sami, to the State of Virginia.

Plans were announced in 1877 by the trustees for a new school of art to be established at the Gallery. This school was opened in January, 1890 in an annex at the rear of the building.

The collections of the Gallery grew rapidly; in 1874 there were 93 oils and 7 pieces of marble sculpture in comparison to 1878 with 145 oils and 19 pieces of marble sculptue. By 1878 there was a large collection of casts of Roman and Greek statues. Many of the bronze casts in the Hall of Bronzes were copies of medieval bronze statues. In the Main Picture Gallery the oils were hung immediately adjacent to one another in the 19th century manner, those considered the more important were hung "on the line" or at eye level. The 1878 catalog for the Gallery indicates that the exhibition was opened frec to the public three days per week, on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Artists were permitted to copy the oils and casts in the Gallery three days per week. The number of visitors increased steadily: 1874 - 66,000, 1875 - 68,000, 1876 - (Centennial celebration) 117,000, and 1877 - 77,000. Soon after opening in 1874 the Gallery sold photographs of its most interesting statues, bronzes, and oils. By 1878 over 100 photos were on sale. A set was given to every American art gallery then in existence.

During the 1880's many improvements were made to the building. The decorations for the front facade were completed. A bronze plaque with the profile of Corcoran, cast in Rome by Moses Ezekiel of Virginia, was placed on the front facade. Two bronze monograms of Corcoran's initials were also put in place on the front. The great sandstone niches on the building were filled with seven foot high marble statues also made by Ezekiel (1879-1884) in Rome, these were added in the 1880's. The four on the front of the building contained statues of Pheidias, Raphael, Michael Angelo, and Durer. The niches of the west side contained statues of Titian, Da Vinci, Rubens, Rembrandt, Murillo, Canova, and Crawford. All

of these statues were sold soon after the Corcoran Gallery moved to its new building in 1897. Eventually they found their way to Richmond, Virginia where they were sold in 1950 for less than $200 each. They were purchased at that time by two private buyers. Two statues by Mrs. Vincent Speranza, 6103 West Club Lane, Richmond, Michael Angelo and Raphael, which remain at the time of this writing in her garden. The remaining nine were purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Dunstan, 4114 Park Avenue, Richmond, Virginia. The Dunstans gave the statue of Crawford to the Virginia State Museum. This was the only statue which Ezekiel modeled from life (he was a close friend of Crawford's); it now rests on the grounds of the Virginia State Museum. The remaining eight statues, Pheidias, Durer, Titian, Da Vinci, Rubens, REmbrandt, Murillo, and Canova, were presented by the Dunstans to the Norjfolk Botanic Cardens, Norfolk, Virginia. The present bases on which all of these statues rest consist of the original sandstone from the Renwick Gallery, on which are carved the names of the individuals portrayed.

Two bronze lions, one asleep and one half-asleep, were placed on either side of the front entrance in 1888. These were purchased by the Gallery at the auction of the Ben. Holiday Mansion at 1311 K Street, N.W. (near the Franklin School) in Washington, D.C. on May 15, 1888 for $1,900. They had been bought by Holiday some years before for $6,000 and were copies of the original marble lions carved by Canova (1757-1822) in 1792 for the cenotaph of Pope Clement XIII in St. Peter's, Rome. The pair of original cast iron gas lamp posts on the steps, erected in 1860-1861, were discarded when the lions were set in place. The lions were removed from the Renwick Callery to the present Corcoran Callery in 1896-1897 when that structure was completed.

In 1889 a large annex was erected to the rear of the Gallery, 24 feet x 106 feet, for the Corcoran School of Art. The building was one story in front and contained three classrooms, lighted by skylights. In the rear of the first floor was located a room 24 feet x 44 feet, containing the bequest of art works left the Gallery by Mrs. B.O. Tayloe of Washington (this room connected with the main building). Above this room was another room of the same size constituting the second story, for the life classes of the school.

The Gallery grew so rapidly that the trustees began making plans in 1890 for expansion. On April 3, 1891, three years after Corcoran's death (at the age of 89), land was purchased by the new Gallery at 17th St. and New York Avenue, N.W. A design by Ernest Flagg of New York won the competion for the new building. Flagg's careful study of existing museums resulted in the most advanced museum design in the United States at the time. The structure progressed as follows: June 26, 1893 - ground broken, May 10, 1894 - cornerstone laid, January 8, 1897 - building completed and the move began from the old building. A great opening reception occurred on February 22, 1897 at which 3,000 guests attended, including President and Mrs. Cleveland.

During the years 1899 to 1964 the Renwick Gallery was the home of the U.S. Caourt of Claims. The physical quarters of the Court of Claims have always been under the jurisdiction of the Architect of the Capitol. The Court never had had a permanent home between 1855 when it was established and 1899 when it occupied the Renwick Gallery. Originally consisting of three judges, it was expanded in 1863 to five judges. The first three months of its existence, the court occupied quarters in the Willard Hotel, 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.

It was then moved into a building at 1509 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., opposite the north front of the Treasury Building. In 1899 it moved into the first floor rooms of the Renwick Gallery, used at that ime mainly as a storage place for government records. In 1912 the Court expanded into part of the second floor and gradually took over the entire building including the annex.

The Court felt that it needed additional quarters in the early 1950's. In 1956 hearings were held by the Senate Committee on Public Works, Sub-committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, on Bill Number S.R. 3445 (and companion Bill Number N.R. 9873), which was for the destruction of the Renwick Gallery and erection of a modern building on the site for the use of the U.S. Court of Claims. The main supporters of the bill were Chief Justice Marvin Jones of the Court of Claims and Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas. During the two days of hearings, June 5 and July 2, 1956, Mr. David E. Finley of the U.S. Fine Arts Commission and Mr. John Nolen, Jr. of the National Capital Planning Commission objected to the bill. They argued that the block on which the Renwick Gallery was situated should be reserved for the future expansion of the Executive Branch of the government. They also urged that the U.S. Court of Claims should be moved to one of either two locations, on Second Street, N.E., behind the U.S. Supreme Court Building or to Judiciary Square with the other courts there. Judge Jones insisted that the Court of Claims remain on the block on which the Renwick Gallery was situated since it was necessary constantly to have access to files of the Executive Offices nearby.

The Court of Claims felt that the Renwick Gallery should be pulled down for several reasons; the building was a fire hazard, there was a great demand for additional space which the Renwick Gallery wasted because of 20 foot ceilings on the first floor and 30 foot ceilings on the second floor, and danger of falling stones from the building. Part of the sandstone decoration was removed in 1947 and 1951 because of deteriation. Between 1951 and 1956 a number of pieces of the stone had broken away and fallen onto the sidewalk, creating a serious hazard. Judge Jones also pointed out that the annex building at the Renwick Gallery was in poor condition. The west section of the annex was one story in height and used as a garage in 1956. The second floor over the east end was used for offices, and the basement used for storage. He mentioned during the hearings that the north and south walls of the annex bulged four inches in the center section.

Because of plans formulated during President Kennedy's administration, Lafayette Square has been restored and developed for offices of the Executive Branch. Most of this work was accomplished during President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. The Court moved out of the Renwick Gallery in 1964 to temporary quarters in an office building at 1325 K Street, N.W. In July, 1967, the Court moved into its new office building at 717 Madison Place, N.W., which it shares with the U.S. Court of Customs and Patent Appeals.

In 1965 S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, met with President Lyndon B. Johnson and requested that the Renwick Gallery be turned over for use to the Smithsonian. In a letter to Dr. Ripely from President Johnson, dated June 23, 1965, the President turned the building over to the Smithsonian "for use as a gallery of art, crafts, and design." He further stated: "no more appropriate purpose for the building could be proposed than

to exhibit in the restored gallery examples of the ingenuity of our people and to present exhibits from other nations whose citizens are so proud of their arts." The building will be used by the President and other distinguished government figures to entertain heads of state. President Johnson referred to this use of the building in the same letter: "I would hope that the tours of this gallery might play a memorable part in the official Washington visits of foreign heads of state, offering them not only a glimpse of our arts, but an opportunity to enjoy the friendliness and hospitality of our people." Restoration of the building for the Smithsonian Institution was begun in 1967 by the firm of Universal Restoration, Inc., 1010 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. The Renwick Gallery should open in 1972 to the public. The exterior of the building has been restored carefully to its original appearance of 1861. The iron cresting which was erected on the tops of the pavilions in 1861, and connecting crestings erected in the 1880's, were removed in the early 1940's for scrap iron for the war effort. These will be replaced at a later date by the Smithsonian Institution. The interior floor plans have been carefully restored, mainly to their 1861 arrangment (except for minor small rooms). The name of the building was changed by the Smithsonian Institution to the Renwick Gallery, both to honor the architect and to distinguish between the Renwick Gallery and the present Corcoran Gallery, one block to the south.

Part II: Description:

The Renwick Gallery, erected 1859-1961 from the design of the New York architect, James Renwick, Jr., is located at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 17th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. This French Second Empire style structure was known as the Corcoran Art Gallery, 1859-1897, and as the U.S. Court of Claims Building, 1899-1964. When the Smithsonian Institution acquired the building in 1965, its name was changed to The Renwick Gallery, both to honor the architect and to distinguish the building from the present Corcoran Gallery, three blocks to the south.

The building faces Pennsylvania Avenue and is rectangular in shape. A major feature of this two-story structure is a set of three pavilions, one on each corner. Above the central door on Pennsylvania Avenue is a fourth or central pavilion, larger than the others. The pavilions are crowned with French mansard roofs, which were originally capped with iron crestings. Eleven large niches, four on the Pennsylvania Avenue facade and seven on the 17th Street facade, all at the second floor level, are major features. These are now bare, but from ca. 1885 to ca. 1900 contained seven-foot high marble statues of "the greatest artists and sculptors of all time." It should be noted here that a pavilion was never erected on the N.E. corner of the building since the structure was designed to be viewed only from two sides.

The width of the building is 107 feet and the length 126 feet. Along the

second floor of the front, under the three pavilions, are recesses flanked by pairs of pilasters with foliated capitals. Other decorative devices used include wreaths of finely carved foliage, monograms of W.W. Corcoran, a round bronze medallion profile of Corcoran on the central pediment, the inscription "Dedicated to Art," two groups of putti over the tops of pairs of columns, and several attributes of Architecture and Music. The building is built of red brick, with sandstone trim, and has a slate roof.

Since originally constructed, the interior and exterior have been slightly modified four times (by the U.S. Army during the 1860's, restored by Corcoran in the early 1870's, modified by the U.S. Court of Claims in the early 20th century, and restored in the late 1960's by the Smithsonian). Today the principal rooms are being restored to their basic original design. The major rooms on each floor are at the north end of the building. As one enters the central door, into a vestibule, a broad staircase extends immediately ahead up to the second floor. A pair of large corridors, flanking the stairway, each eight feet wide, extend to the rear on the first floor to the original "Sculpture Hall," 86 feet x 25 feet. A large exhibit room on the first floor, in the center of the west side, measures 62 feet x 19 feet and connects the southwest pavilion with the northwest pavilion. This room is partially divided into three sections by four large impressive Corinthian columns, originally with gilt capitals. The ceiling of the first floor measures approximately 20 feet in height. The first floor was originally used for the exhibit of sculpture while the second floor contained paintings. A rectangular lobby, approximately 42 feet x 16 feet, is located behind and in front of the Sculpture Hall; it has two bay windows that originally opened onto internal light wells, now converted to service units.

The main staircase leads directly to the entrance of the principal exhibit room of the building, the great hall or old "Main Picture Gallery," on the north end, extending the entire width of the building, measuring approximately 96 feet x 45 feet. Over the vestibule on the second floor is the Octagon Room, 24 feet x 24 feet, with large exhibit rooms on either side. Most skylights over the galleries on the second floor have now been covered.

Plans for the renovation of the interior have been carried out by the Washington architect, Mr. Hugh Jacobson. The exterior was restored by the firm of Universal Restoration, Inc., 1010 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C.

Part III: Bibliography:

Most of the sources for this brief history came from the extensive files on the history of the Renwick Gallery recently collected by the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution. The archives of the present Corcoran Gallery were also consulted for information on the architecture of the building. The Catalogues of the Corcoran Art Gallery of 1878 and 1890 are particularly useful for the study of the early floor plans, as well as the published pamphlet on the design of the building: Specifications of the Various Kinds of Work In A Building To Be Erected on the Corner of Penn. Avenue and 17th Street, Washington, D. C. ca. 1858, pp. 1-15 (the original is in the D. C. Public Library, Washingtonian Room and a copy in the N. C. F. A.). The newspaper files of the 1870's and 1880's contain a wealth of information on the activities of the Corcoran Art Gallery.

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Court of Claims
N.E. Cor. 17th St., & Penna., Avenue
Washington, D. C.

HABS No. DC-49

Present Owner: U.S. Government

Present Occupant and Use: Court

Description

Brick with Brownstone trim. Height of building about same as the 5-storied Old State, War, and Navy Bldg., across the street on Penna., Ave. Consists of a central pavilion, with curtain on either side and flanked by two other pavilions, one on either corner. The central pavilion has vermiculated quoins which enclose a grand entrance door, with carved jamb and archway. Above, a Palladian window forms a principal motif with arched recess above that filled with carved decorations; a triangular pediment surmounting the whole. Corner pavilions were ornamented in similar manner except fluted pilasters are used instead of engaged columns along with arched pediments. Originally across the front of the building were four, and on the side seven niches holding statues - later altered into windows. Colossal bronze lions flanking the entrance steps were transferred to the new Corcoran Gallery. At the rear of the building facing 17th St., stands on addition made in 1889 to accommodate the Corcoran School of Art.

Historical Data

Year of erection: 1859

Built for (first owner): Original Corcoran Art Gallery

Architect: James Renwick

Builder: W.W. Corcoran

Notable events and occupants

Erected in 1859, by W.W. Corcoran, Esq. to house the Corcoran Art Gallery; the Civil War broke out before it could be opened and the building was occupied by the Quartermaster General's Department, U.S.A. The structure was finally conveyed by the donor in 1869 to a Board of Trustees, incorporated in 1870. Corcoran's collection of Fine Arts was opened to the public in 1873 and continued to be exhibited here until completion of the present Corcoran Gallery in 1897. That year the Government acquired the old building for use of the Court of Claims. Corcoran's building at 17th & Penn., Ave., is said to have cost him $250,000. The value of the Art collection he gave is said to have exceeded $100,000. or more.

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References: W.P.A. Washington Guide, p. 1029; Court of Claims Release, J. C. Proctor, Sunday Star, 1/4/42. HABI form prepared by Louis Simon, T. Russell Jones and Worth Bailey, HABS, National Park Service, December 1958.

Approved Dick Sutton Date Feb. 17, 1959
Chief Architect

Addendum to:
Corcoran Art Gallery (U.S. Court of Claims) HABS No. DC-49
(Smithsonian Institution, Renwick Gallery)
17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington
District of Columbia

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CORCORAN ART GALLERY HABS No. DC-49
(U.S. Court of Claims)
(Smithsonian Institution, Renwick Gallery)

Location: 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW., Washington, District of Columbia.

Present Owner: Smithsonian Institution.

Significance: The Corcoran Art Gallery was erected in 1859-61 by William Wilson Corcoran, Washington banker and philanthropist as a gallery for his private collection; the building was designed by James Renwick.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

By mid-1861 the exterior of the building was finished except for many of the decorative devices used on the front facade however little interior work had been completed. Because the gallery was on a site located diagonally across from the White House, it was seized by the U.S. Army in August 1861 as a warehouse for the storage of records and uniforms for the Quarter Master General's Corps. The building at that time was roofed but unfloored and unplastered. In January 1864, the building was cleared and converted into the offices of the Headquarters of the Quarter Master General's Corps (Gen. Montgomery Meigs). Although Corcoran's agent continually sent written requests to the U.S. Army for payment of rent for the use of the building, no actions was taken by the government during the time it used the structure (1861-1869). The annual rent requested was $8,500.

After the Civil War, Corcoran returned to Washington and pressed for the return of the art gallery. He immediately established a board of trustees and established a trust when it was returned to his control on May 10, 1869. In May 1870, it was chartered by act of Congress, and freed from government taxation and by which the gallery was able to recover the back rent.

A grand ball was held to preview the building on the evening of Monday, February 20, 1871. Over 2,000 paying guests attended from 9 p.m. until 4 p.m. The ball was held during the carnival season before Lent which was widely observed in Washington in the 19the century, and was the first major social event in the city since the termination of the Civil War which both the pro-Southern elements (mainly the old families to Washington and Georgetown) and the officials of Grant's Reconstruction government attended. President Grant, the Vice-President, the Cabinet, Members of Congress, major officers of the Army and Navy, and the Diplomatic Corps were present.

Work continued on the interior of the building from February 1871 to January 1874, and the building opened as an art gallery for private viewing on January 19, 1874. At that time three rooms had been finished: the Hall of Bronzes on the first floor, the Main Picture Gallery and the Octagon Room on the second

floor. A contemporary review of the opening mentioned that the building was of "pressed brick and freestone, in Renaissance style of architecture." On April 29, 1874, the Hall of Sculpture was opened. The last of the galleries to be finished, the two small rooms of sculpture adjacent to the staircase on the first floor, were opened in December 1874.

The major room in the building was the Main Picture Gallery or the Hall of Paintings, at the north end of the second floor. The walls of the room were painted a light maroon, with heavy walnut wainscoting. The paintings exhibited were primarily from Corcoran's collection, worth $100,000 when he gave them to the gallery in 1873. The Octagon Room, also on the second floor, contained five pieces of sculpture--four in niches: a bust of Shakespeare, "II Penseroso," "The Greek Slave," purchase in London by Corcoran for $5,000 stood in the center of the room. It was undoubtedly the most famous piece of art in the Museum in 1874. Additional pictures were to be purchased from the annual income of $50,000 from the endowment.

In 1877 the Corcoran trustees announced plans for a new school of art to be established at the gallery. The school opened in January 1890, in an annex at the rear of the building.

By 1878 the gallery's collection had grown from 93 oil paintings and 7 marble sculptures to 145 oil paintings and 19 sculptures.

In the Main Picture Gallery the oils were hung immediately adjacent to one another in the 19th century manner, those considered more important were hung "on the line" or at eye level. The 1878 catalog for the Gallery indicates that the exhibition was open free to the public three days a week, on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. Artists were permitted to copy the oils and casts in the Gallery three days per week. Soon after opening in 1874 the Gallery sold photographs of its most interesting statues, bronzes, and oils. By 1878 over 100 photos were on sale. A set was given to every American art gallery then in existence.

During the 1880's many improvements were made to the building. The decorations for the main facade were completed. A bronze plaque with the profile of Corcoran, cast in Rome by Moses Ezekiel of Virginia, and two bronze monograms of Corcoran's initials were put in place on the main elevation. The great sandstone niches on the building were filled with seven foot high marble statues made in Rome by Ezekiel. The four niches on the front of the building contained statues of Pheidias, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Durer. The niches on the west facade contained statues of Titian, Da Vinci, Rubens, Rembrandt, Murillo, Canova, and Crawford. All of these statues were sold soon after the Corcoran Gallery moved to its new building in 1897. Eventually they found their way to Richmond, Virginia where they were sold in 1950 for less than $200 each. They were purchased at that time by two private buyers, Mrs. Vincent Speranza, 6102 West Club Lane, Richmond, Virginia (Michelangelo and Raphael) and Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Dunstan, 4114 Park Avenue, Richmond, Virginia. The Dunstans gave the statue of Crawford to the Virginia Stare Museum.

The remaining eight statues, Pheidias, Durer, Titain, Da Vinci, Rubens, Rembrandt, Murillo, and Canova, were presented by the Dunstans to the Norfolk Botanic Gardens, Norfolk, Virginia. The present bases on which all of these statues rest consist of original sandstone from the Renwick Gallery.

Two bronze lions, one asleep and one half-asleep, were placed on either side of the front entrance in 1888. These were purchased by the Gallery at the auction of the Ben. Holiday Mansion at 1311 K Street, NW. (near the Franklin School) in Washington, D.C. on May 15, 1888 for $1,900. The lions bought by Holiday for $6,000, are copies of the marble lions carved by Canova in 1792 for the cenotaph of Pope Clement XIII in St. Peter's, Rome. The pair of original cast iron gas lamp posts on the steps, erected in 1860-1861, were discarded when the lions were set in place. The lions were removed from the Renwick Gallery to the present Corcoran Gallery in 1896-1897 when that structure was completed.

In 1889 a large annex was erected at the rear of the Gallery, 24 feet x 106 feet, for the Corcoran School of Art. The building was one story in front and contained three classrooms, lighted by skylights. In the rear of the first floor was a room 24 feet x 44 feet, containing art works left to the Gallery by Mrs. B. O. Tayloe of Washington (this room connected with the main building). Above this room on the second floor, another room of the same size was used for the life classes of the school.

The Gallery grew so rapidly that the trustees began making plans in 1890 for expansion. On April 3, 1891, three years after Corcoran's death, land was purchased by the new Gallery at 17the Street and New York Avenue, NW. A design by Ernest Flagg of New York won the competition for the new building. Flagg's careful study of existing museums resulted in the most advanced museum design in the United States at the time. Ground was broken on June 26, 1983. On May 10, 1894 the cornerstone was laid. The building was completed and the move began from the old building on January 8, 1897. A great opening reception was held on February 22, 1897 which 3,000 guests, including President and Mrs. Cleveland attended.

From 1899 to 1964 the Renwick Gallery was the home of the U.S. Court of Claims. The Court of Claims was established in 1855 but had no permanent site until 1899 when it occupied the Renwick Gallery.

In the 1950's the Court decided that it needed additional quarters. In 1956 hearings were held by the Senate Committee on Public Works, Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, on Bill Number SS.R. 3445 (and companion Bill Number N.R. 9873), for the destruction of the Renwick Gallery and erection of a modern building on the site for the use of the U.S. Court of Claims. The chief supporters of the bill were Chief Justice Marvin Jones of the Court of Claims and Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas. During the two days of hearings, June and 5 and July 2, 1956, Mr. David E. Finley of the U.S. Fine Arts Commission and Mr. John Nolen, Jr. of the National Capital Planning Commission voiced objections to the bill. They argued that the block on which the Renwick Gallery was situated should be reserved for the future expansion of the Executive Branch of the government. They also urged that the U.S. Court

of Claims should be moved to one of either two locations, on Second Street, N.E., behind the U.S. Supreme Court Building or to Judiciary Square. Judge Jones insisted that the Court of Claims remain on the block on which the Renwick Gallery was situated since it was necessary to have access to the files of the Executive Offices nearby.

The Court of Claims recommended that the Renwick Gallery be pulled down for several reasons: it claimed that the building was a fire hazard, that there was a great demand for additional space which the Renwick Gallery wasted because of the 20 foot ceilings on the first floor and 30 foot ceilings on the second floor, and that there was danger of falling stones from the building. Part of the sandstone decoration was removed in 1947 and 1951 because of deterioration. Between 1951 and 1956 a number of pieces of the stone had broken away and fallen onto the sidewalk, creating a serious hazard. Judge Jones also pointed out that the annex building at the Renwick Gallery was in poor condition. The west section of the annex was one story in height and used as a garage in 1956. The second floor over the east end was used for offices, and the basement used for storage. He mentioned during the hearings that the north and south walls of the annex bulged four inches in the center section.

Lafayette Square was restored and developed for offices of the Executive Branch from 1967-1978. Most of this work was accomplished during President Lyndon B. Johnson's Administration. The Court moved out of the Renwick Gallery in 1964 to temporary quarters in an office building at 1325 K Street, NW. in July 1967, the Court moved into its new office building at 717 Madison Place, NW., which it shares with the U.S. Court of Customs and Patent Appeals.

In 1965 S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, met with President Lyndon B. Johnson and requested that the Renwick Gallery be turned over for use to the Smithsonian. In a letter to Dr. Ripley from President Johnson, dated June 23, 1965, the President turned the building over to the Smithsonian "for use as a gallery of art, crafts, and design." He further stated: "no more appropriate purpose for the building could be proposed than to exhibit in the restored gallery examples of the ingenuity of our people and to present exhibits from other nations whose citizens are so proud of their arts." President Johnson referred to the use of the building to entertain visiting heads of state in the same letter: "I would hope that the tours of this gallery might play a memorable part in the official Washington visits of foreign heads of state, offering the em not only a glimpse of our arts, but an opportunity to enjoy the friendliness and hospitality of our people." Restoration of the building for the Smithsonian Institution was begun in 1967 by the firm of Universal Restoration, Inc., 1010 Vermont Avenue, NW., Washington, D.C. The exterior of the building has been restored carefully to its original appearance of 1861. The iron cresting which was erected on the tops of the pavilions in 1861, and connecting crestings erected in the 1880's, were removed in the early 1940's for scrap iron for the war effort. These will be replaced at a later date by the Smithsonian Institution. The interior floor plans have been carefully restored, mainly to their 1861 arrangement (except for minor small rooms). The name of the building was changed by the Smithsonian Institution to the Renwick Gallery, both to honor the architect and to distinguish between the Renwick Gallery and the present Corcoran Gallery, one block to the south.

PART II. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The building faces Pennsylvania Avenue and is rectangular in shape. Major features of this two-story structure are three pavilions, one on each corner. Above the central door on Pennsylvania Avenue is a fourth or central pavilion, larger than the others. The pavilions are crowned with French mansard roofs, which were originally capped with iron crestings. Eleven large niches, four on the Pennsylvania Avenue facade and seven on the 17th Street facade, all at the second floor level, once contained seven-foot high marble statues of "the greatest artists and sculptors of all time."

The width of the building is 107 feet and the length 126 feet. Along the second floor of the front, under the three pavilions, are recesses flanked by pairs of pilasters with foliated capitals. Other decorative devices once included wreaths of finely carved foliage, monograms of W. W. Corcoran, a round bronze medallion profile of Corcoran on the central pediment, the inscription "Dedicated to Art," two groups of putti over the tops of pairs of columns, and several attributes of Architecture and Music. The building is built of red brick, with sandstone trim, and has a slate roof.

Since originally constructed, the interior and exterior have been slightly modified four times (by the U.S. Army during the 1860's, restored by Corcoran in the early 1870's, modified by the U.S. Court of Claims in the early 20the century, and restored in the late 1960's by the Smithsonian). The principal rooms have been restored to their basic original design. The major rooms on each floor are at the north end of the building. As one enters the central door, into a vestibule, a broad staircase extends immediately ahead up to the second floor. A pair of large corridors, flanking the stairway, each eight feet wide, extend to the rear on the first floor to the original "Hall of Sculpture," 86 feet x 25 feet. A large exhibit room on the first floor, in the center of the west side, measures 62 feet x 19 feet and connects the southwest pavilion with the northwest pavilion. This room is partially divided into three sections by four large impressive Corinthian columns, originally with gilt capitals. The ceiling of the first floor measures approximately 20 feet in height. The first floor was originally used for the exhibit of sculpture while the second floor contained paintings. A rectangular lobby, approximately 42 feet x 16 feet, is located behind and in front of the Sculpture Hall; it has two bay windows that originally opened onto internal light wells, now converted to service units.

The main staircase leads directly to the entrance of the principal exhibit room of the building, the great hall or old "Main Picture Gallery," on the north end, extending the entire width of the building, measuring approximately 96 feet x 45 feet. Over the vestibule on the second floor is the Octagon Room, 24 feet x 24 feet, with large exhibit rooms on either side. Most skylights over the galleries on the second floor have now been covered.

The exterior of the building is still undergoing restoration. For an illustrated article on the process of restoration see Field Records for this site.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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The Corcoran Gallery of Art is source of the data on Ezekiel's sculpture, last paragraph, p. 5.

IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Historic data for this site was compiled by James M. Goode, Smithsonian Institution, March 1, 1971. Photographs were taken by Jack E. Boucher, HABS photographer, in September and October 1971. The documentation was updated and edited to conform to HABS Standards and prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by Eleni Silverman, architectural historian in the HABS office, in August 1984.

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Addendum to:
CORCORAN ART GALLERY
(U.S. Court of Claims)
(Smithsonian Institution, Renwick Gallery)
17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-49

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Addendum to:
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(U.S. Court of Claims)
(Smithsonian Institution, Renwick Gallery)
17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW
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Data pages 1 through 7 were previously transmitted to the Library of Congress. This is data page 8.

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(Negative)

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-101R SOUTH FACADE--LEVEL
(Negative)

Left and right overlap: 85%

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(Diapositive)

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-102R SOUTH FACADE--INCLINED
(Diapositive)

Left and right overlap: 85%

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-103L * SW CORNER, LEFT PAIR
(Diapositive)

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-103R SW CORNER, LEFT PAIR
(Diapositive)

Left and right overlap: 90%

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-104L SW CORNER, LEFT PAIR
(Negative)

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-104R * SW CORNER, LEFT PAIR
(Negative)

Left and right overlap: 85%

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-105L WEST FACADE, LEFT PAIR
(Diapositive)

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-105R * WEST FACADE, LEFT PAIR
(Diapositive)

Left and right overlap: 90%

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-106L WEST FACADE, RIGHT PAIR
(Diapositive)

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-106R * WEST FACADE, RIGHT PAIR
(Diapositive)
(Plate missing)

Left and right overlap: 85%

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(Negative)

LC-HABS-GS05-T-2626-107R NW CORNER, RIGHT PAIR
(Negative)
(Plate missing)

Left and right overlap: 90%

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